

"Bug of the Month"

Take a stroll in a local meadow this time of year and you'll probably notice foamy clumps of froth clinging to the grass stems. These bubbly patches are produced by spittlebug nymphs, in the genus *Philaenus*. Adults are commonly known as froghoppers.

WHAT DO THEY LOOK LIKE? Spittlebugs undergo one generation per year and overwinter as eggs. Adult spittlebugs are wedge-shaped insects, approximately one-quarter of an inch long. Their color is usually a mottled gray or brown, but can range from cream to almost black. Eggs are laid in rows on plants in the space between a leaf and stem. The yellow to orange colored eggs are laid in late summer and do not hatch until the following spring. Upon hatching, the nymphs immediately begin feeding on their host plant by sucking the plant sap. The "spittle" is a coating produced by the nymphs to protect it from dry air and predators. Bodily secretions and air forced from small glands located near their tail end create the frothy mass. Hidden underneath the layer of foam, the nymph feeds on the tender new growth of the plants' leaves, stems and buds. One to several nymphs may be found within a mass of froth. Nymphs feed from the time of hatching in April or May until they mature and molt into adults in July. Adults feed on a variety of plants until late summer when they mate and lay their eggs.



Spittlebug froth. Photo by Paul Sitler

WHAT DO THEY DO? There are many different species of spittlebugs in North America and each species feeds on a distinct type of plant. Host plants include alfalfa, clover, holly, juniper, pine and strawberry. Most damage to the host plant is caused by the feeding nymphs, which introduce a toxin into the plant's vascular system. Damage to mature plants by spittlebug nymphs is usually limited to yellow spots on leaves. However, heavy infestations can cause stunting or distortion of leaves or blossoms. Here in western Washington, spittlebugs are most likely to cause problems to clover and strawberries. Spittlebug infestations of strawberries can cause small or distorted fruit or even weaken or kill the entire plant.



Spittlebug adult. Photo by Oregon State University Extension Service

MANAGEMENT. The best method to control spittlebugs is through mechanical methods.

- Home gardeners can reduce spittlebug damage by raking away the leaves and stems of strawberry plants during the winter to help remove egg sources.
- Hose plants with a strong spray of water in the spring to dislodge some spittlebugs from plants and wash away the froth. Without the froth, some of the very small spittlebugs will dry out and die.
- Plant flowers to attract lacewings and ladybug, which are natural predators of the spittlebug.
- Finally, you can hand pick the nymphs from their bubbly habitat. This is also a fun job for an adventuresome child.

MORE QUESTIONS? Please do not hesitate to give your "Bug Docs" a call at comm.: (360) 315-4450, DSN: 322-4450 or you can e-mail us at ndveccmei@pnw.med.navy.mil.